

A Christian view of Government

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- **Government is a good, but it is important to recognise that it has its limitations.**
- **The Bible does not provide the answer to every intricate question of policy detail; it does provide a framework within which policy making can be approached.**

Questions regarding the role of Government have been the subject of endless debate. Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism, the 'New Right' and the 'Third Way' have all set out different theories. Theologians' approaches to the question have been as varied. Constantine, after his conversion in 312AD, ended the persecution of Christians and offered the church support. Christianity was introduced as the official state religion. In the sixteenth century, Calvin, the Protestant reformer, set up a theocracy in Geneva and attempted to enforce biblical norms. During the radical reformation the Anabaptists rejected the ideal of a Christian state and the coercion of dissenters, arguing that believers should separate from the wicked world and its institutions.

In considering the role of Government, it is important to step carefully and recognise the historical (and theological) distance that exists between our contemporary situation and those situations addressed by the biblical writers. Our 'political world' is radically different from the political worlds that can be 'seen through' the biblical documents or have existed throughout most of human history. Only recently have ordinary people been able to directly influence the governance of nations. It is not surprising then that the biblical writers do not address our topic directly. Our aim is to 'enter into' the specific situations addressed by the biblical documents before seeking to extrapolate biblical principles to apply to contemporary society.

Our position in history spares us embarking on this enterprise alone. Instead, we can 'stand on the shoulders of giants' and be guided by the conflicting but useful insights of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. Space precludes a consideration of their theories on the role of Government, but we can allow their reflections to steer and critique our thinking.

It is important, at the outset, to appreciate our theological position as the New Testament People of God.

Old and New Testament perspectives

In the Old Testament, God entered into a treaty based relationship with an ethnic people group. God's covenant with Israel was as political as it was spiritual. As a theocracy, Israel's laws dealt with political, economic, and social as well as 'spiritual' life. No distinction was drawn between types of law. God's intention was that Israel would be a 'light to the nations'; he would reveal himself through her corporate life. God promised Israel land, protection, political influence and economic success on condition that he was acknowledged as her king (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). Punishment was promised in the event of rebellion and this, too, was expressed politically: national defeat, destruction and exile (Deuteronomy 28:15 to 68). In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet challenges Israel to see her exile as both a consequence and a confirmation of her sin. First century Jews were in a similar situation. They were living in Israel but under Roman occupation and so felt distant from God's blessing.

It is important to note that the New Testament is both similar and dissimilar to the Old Testament. It is similar in the sense that God's commitment to establishing good relationships with human beings is demonstrated. The New Testament is dissimilar, however, in the

application of God's righteousness which is no longer expressed or enforced politically. The apostle Paul, reflecting on this situation, asserts that 'Now a righteousness (or 'justice') of God, apart from the law, has been revealed, to which the Law and the Prophets testify' (Romans 3:21).

New Testament: a new people

In the New Testament, God's people are no longer defined along ethnic lines but represent a radically new type of community, incorporating people of all nationalities and backgrounds who acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Jesus announced and enacted the good news of the kingdom of God, the fulfilment of Isaiah 40:1 to 2, the end of Israel's exile. In so doing, Jesus embarked on the reconstitution of Israel around himself, beginning with the twelve disciples who representing twelve historic tribes. Tom Wright states that *"Through his actions and words Jesus was calling into being a people with a new identity, a new family. 'Here are my mother and my brothers; everyone who hears the word of God and does it' (Mark 3:34 to 35). This renewed community, a 'family' formed around Jesus included all and sundry, the only qualification being their adherence to Jesus and his kingdom message"* (The Challenge of Jesus, London: SPCK 2000).

Unlike the Old Testament then, a clear distinction now exists between the political and 'spiritual' worlds. Jesus acknowledged the place of political authority (Mark 12:17) but also said that the kingdom of God was in a different 'order' from temporal powers: it is not established by political action (John 18:36). God's people are to be involved in the redemption of our world, and that includes our political world, but the kingdom of God should not (and cannot) be enforced using political power. Under the New Covenant, God has abolished the judicial and priestly aspects of the Levitical laws. Even Old Testament 'moral law' has to be interpreted through the teaching of Jesus.

So, what is the task of Government?

The limits of Government

It is important to begin by recognising that Government is a 'good thing' and not simply a necessary evil in a sinful world. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and he appointed human beings, 'in his likeness', to 'fill the earth and subdue it', to 'rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' (Genesis 1:28) Our role as human beings then, even before the entry of sin into the world, was to rule Earth as God's representatives.

Of course, human beings rebelled against God and the consequences were disastrous and all encompassing. All aspects of Creation, human beings and Government are now affected by sin, and it is the task of God's people to embark on the restoration of our originally good world by revealing God to it, thereby challenging, influencing and shaping it. Government is a good thing but it is limited.

Government, firstly, is limited morally. It is limited in what it should do. In God's governance of the universe, both before and after human rebellion, he acknowledges the importance of freedom within a moral order: freedom coupled with responsibility. Human responsibility is dependent on a belief that humans can choose between right and wrong. Choosing to sin has direct and indirect consequences: alienation, and helplessness on the one hand and direct judgement on the other; but it is still a choice. Government should, therefore, allow people to exercise significant freedom and responsibility. Of course absolute freedom is an impossible state of affairs (freedoms, like rights, can conflict). Deciding the limits of Government intervention can be difficult. In a free society, is it reasonable for the law and the courts to intervene in questions of 'private' morality for instance? The problem is that what is private cannot easily be distinguished from what is public.

Secondly, Government is limited practically. It is limited in what it can do. It is powerless to do some things. Israel's Law did not ensure that she worshipped God or gave him supremacy.

Indeed, the apostle Paul notes that 'the law was powerless... in that it was weakened by the sinful nature.' (Romans 8:3). The belief in human sinfulness provides us with a powerful basis to be suspicious when a Government or political party promises utopia. Paul states that 'the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.' (Romans 8:7) Law, as we shall see, has an important role in judging and punishing evil but it cannot change people; it can only help to control outward conduct.

Paul clearly thinks that Government is a 'good thing' and that God has established the authorities that do exist: 'Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God instituted' (Romans 13:2). Paul does not expect submission to authority at any price, however. Subordination is discriminating, supported by conscience. The apostle acted in defiance of the law in preaching that Jesus, and not the emperor, was Lord. Peter and John spoke of being accountable to a higher authority (Acts 4:19).

Three roles for Government

Paul does not offer a highly developed political philosophy, but he seems to think that Government has a basic three fold role in a) restraining evil, b) judging and punishing evil, and c) promoting human wellbeing.

(A) RESTRAINING EVIL. Paul sees 'disorder' or lawlessness as a 'bad thing'. Unless public order is effectively assured, the actual existence of society is endangered. The apostle urges prayers 'for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:3 to 4). Paul is not, significantly, calling the people of God to introspection and withdrawal. Quite the opposite is true: Paul considers peace as instrumental to the spread of the gospel. In short, order and stability will enable the Kingdom of God to be preached and advanced.

(B) JUDGING AND PUNISHING EVIL. Secondly, Government not only has a 'negative' role to play in 'restraining evil' but also has a 'positive' role in judging evil, in declaring it 'evil' and in punishing it. Paul writes that 'rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.' (Romans 13:3) In Paul's thinking, Government 'is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13:4). Similarly, in our postmodern age the existence of evil is still accepted in our laws. They clearly and uncontroversially outlaw and judge particular evils. Consider laws against murder, assault and theft. Of course, Governments that act unjustly and declare evil 'good' are subject to God's judgement. In a democracy, the electorate enjoys both the privilege of electing their rulers and shares the responsibility when unrighteous and unjust laws are passed (even when only a minority of the electorate votes).

(C) PROMOTING HUMAN WELLBEING. Thirdly, Paul states that people in authority are God's servants 'to do you good' (Romans 13:4), so Government also has a useful role in promoting human wellbeing or 'the good'. Paul does not explain his exact conception of 'the good' here. In a general biblical sense human wellbeing refers to righteousness or justice, i.e. living rightly or justly before God. Clearly, this has application at both an individual and societal level and entails a particular concern for the poor and disadvantaged (the 'widows and orphans', to use the biblical shorthand). In both the Old and the New Testament, then, Government has an obligation to support the marginalised and the outcast (e.g. Leviticus 19:9). Government, says Paul, can (and should) create the necessary conditions whereby human wellbeing is possible. One of the ways it can do this is by providing the necessary conditions whereby the Church can flourish. Government, however, can never ensure ultimate human wellbeing by itself.

Practical implications of Christian teaching about Government

Paul's basic understanding of the role of Government is uncontroversial. Politicians can disagree regarding the extent to which law should be used to stop people acting immorally (e.g. stealing) or ensure people act in right ways (helping the poor), but not on the principle that this is the correct way in which the law should so be used. Our reflections, however, still

take us on to difficult questions. *What are the actual limits of Government? Did Paul think in terms of positive or negative freedom? Did Paul envisage 'restraining evil' to include the positive eradication of social, moral, political and institutional evils (e.g. the abolition of slavery) by Government? Or was 'restraining evil' confined simply to keeping social order? Did the apostle think that promoting human well-being required Government to introduce a welfare state?* Of course, it is impossible to know. Paul's political philosophy was probably influenced by his surrounding political environment as well as theological considerations.

Paul's view that Government should promote 'the good' of society requires us to accept a particular definition of 'the good' or 'human well-being' (individual and common). Our society, however, accepts no one definition, and this has profound repercussions on the way in which Government carries out its functions. Is it then right for a Government to allow one conception of wellbeing to determine its policies?

In tackling this question, it is important to reject the idea that Government can be 'neutral' or 'objective' in the decisions it takes. No Government cannot be neutral concerning differing conceptions of wellbeing. State action will always support some ways of conceiving wellbeing and morality over and against others, and it is proper for law to do this. Government has a duty to restrict certain freedoms to support 'the good'. In the Red Book for the July 1997 Budget, the Government stated that 'How and what is taxed sends clear signals about the economic activities which Governments believe should be encouraged and discouraged, and the values they wish to entrench in society.' The issue, therefore, is not whether a belief system per se should or should not direct Government policy but whether the belief system being used is morally good. Increasingly, the dominant political ideology is secular, based on autonomous human rights. Secularism is repeatedly presented as 'neutral'. In reality it is often intolerant and oppressive.

Our contention in this paper is that every policy of every Party should always be judged against the criteria outlined above:

- + Does it recognise the limitations of Government, morally and practically?
- + Does it promote human freedom and responsibility?
- + Does it restrain evil?
- + Does it judge and punish evil?
- + Does it promote human wellbeing?

It is simply not possible to establish a Christian position or biblical blueprint for every policy area (e.g. the welfare state or transport). It is important, however, that we allow the questions above to shape our approach to every policy. Our challenge, as the New Testament People of God, in all parties, is to encourage our colleagues and the electorate to agree on a common approach to Government before we engage in policy debate